

Chasing Shadows

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Summary: Odd things start happening when the Digi-destined get lost in a forest. On permanent hiatus.

1. Prologue & Chapter 1

Chasing Shadows Prologue & Chapter 1

****Author's Notes:****

Konnichi wa, minna-san! Since this is my very first fanfic (for anything, not just Digimon), please don't be too hard on me. I'll try to make sure none of the characters are OOC (Out Of Character) or anything like that, but if you notice any slip-ups - character, plotline, grammar, spelling, etc. - I'd appreciate it if you'd let me know. Keep in mind, though, that if I happen to like something the way it is, I might not change it. Maybe. Anyway, this story definitely takes place after "Sora's Crest of Love", but before the next episode; too bad I forgot the name of it...^^;

Oh yes, standard disclaimers apply, as always. Digimon is owned by Bandai or whatever; I own nothing, save for a few characters I made up along the way, and the story idea. If for some bizarre reason you'd like to use the things I made up in your own story, please ask me first. (Not that anyone would actually want to use 'em, of course.) So, read on, and please please please let me know what you think of it!

Chasing Shadows

By

Akia Starfrost

Prologue

Pure white drops of crystal spiraled gently down through the tree

branches, glistening softly in the dim light of a gray dawn. In steadily increasing numbers they landed gracefully on the trees, the ground, anything that got in their path of descent, adding to the already substantial blanket of white. Tai shivered slightly as a frosty gust of wind blew across his bare arms and legs, and part of his mind wondered when it had gotten cold enough to snow. He hoped it wouldn't get much colder. The cold didn't really bother him, but he knew the others were less tolerant, especially Mimi, and even Tai had his limits.

No one else was awake yet, as far as he knew. He'd gotten stuck with the last watch of the night, so he'd been up for an hour or two already. He could just barely make out the sun behind that thick mass of dark silver clouds, and from what he could tell it had a ways to go yet before it cleared the horizon. The others could sleep for another hour or two at least, he decided. He was quite aware of how tired everyone was, especially after all that walking yesterday.

Yawning hugely, he stretched cramped limbs, careful to not lose his balance. The branch he lounged on was more than thick enough to support his weight, but even so it was slick with snow, and maybe a bit of ice. He wasn't worried about falling; it was well worth the view. And besides, he'd climbed quite a few trees as of late, snow and ice or no, to be able to see where they were, and hopefully figure out where they should be going. It was impossible to see much from the ground; the pine trees were densely packed all around. They'd been lost in this forest for much longer than was healthy for group morale, but there seemed to be no end to it. Even from the vantage point of where he sat, all he could see was more trees, and to the north a cluster of mountains crouched low against the horizon. At the moment, that was where they were heading, since it was the only visible landmark besides the forest. Still, it was pretty far away.

A flash of black against pure white off to his left caught Tai's attention. He quickly dug his mini-telescope out of his pocket, and leveled it in the direction he thought the flash to have been in. At first he saw nothing more than snowflakes drifting across his vision, and with all the trees, it was hard to make out much of anything anyway. Before

long, though, another flash of darkness made itself known, darting between the tall pines like black lightning streaking across a noon-day sky. It was gone almost as soon as it had appeared. With a puzzled frown, Tai lowered the

telescope and waited for another glimpse of the mysterious shadow, but after several long moments, he reluctantly put away his telescope. Whatever it had been, it was gone now, apparently. He knew he couldn't have imagined it. It

had to have been there...

"Hey, Tai!"

Startled, Tai almost toppled out of his tree. "Huh?" Looking down, he saw Agumon looking up at him, a slight hint of annoyance on the orange dinosaur-esque features. "What?"

"Aren't we supposed to be keeping watch?"

"I am." Tai grinned at his digimon. "I'll be able to see something coming from a mile away up here!" His grin slipped momentarily as thoughts of the strange shadow danced across his mind, but he pushed them away for the moment. Time enough to worry about that later, if it became a threat. He spared a glance for the sleeping group below him, and saw that some of them were beginning to stir, probably woken up by the slightly-too-loud exchange between digimon and digi-destined. "May as well wake 'em all up, I guess."

Tai picked his way carefully down the tree, keeping the direction of the mountains in mind. Several feet from the ground, he felt his foot slip on an icy branch, and gave a sharp cry as he plummeted the rest of the way to the

snow-covered ground to land roughly on his rear end. "Oww..." He stood up a bit stiffly, rubbing his sore posterior and wishing the snow offered a bit more cushioning, and scowled at his snickering digimon companion. "Not a word, pal."

Rousing his friends turned out to be more of a chore than he bargained for. Of those who had begun to stir, only Matt was truly awake, but if he had seen Tai's little performance, he made no comment. Tai assumed he hadn't seen it. It wasn't like Matt to pass up such a golden opportunity to make a wise-ass remark. Either way, he was grateful Matt kept silent, except to help him wake everyone up.

Mimi, naturally, was the hardest to get up. For a self-proclaimed princess, she sure slept like a rock, Tai thought with a wry grin as he watched her toss about and mumble in her sleep. After several tries, he decided to go with the easy wake-up method. Lacking a sufficient amount of water, however, he improvised.

"WAKE UP!!"

With an ear-splitting shriek and flailing arms that Tai narrowly avoided, Mimi sat up abruptly, breathing hard. Eyes locking on the laughing boy next to her, she grabbed the collar of his shirt with two fists and pulled his face close to hers. Light brown eyes glared furiously into suddenly nervous hazel ones. "You idiot! I was having the greatest dream! I was a real princess, with lots of servants and food and fancy clothes and jewelry and a hot bath, and a really handsome prince," she blushed, as though realizing she'd let more slip than she intended, "and then you nearly give me a heart attack right before he-" She broke off as her face turned a shade redder, and gave Tai an angry shake to cover it up. "DON'T EVER DO THAT AGAIN!!"

Tai nodded weakly, and Mimi released her death grip on him. He quickly stumbled away from the visibly fuming girl, nearly tripping over Matt in his haste. Ignoring the smug look on his blonde friend's face, he said, "Next time, you wake her up." Matt just laughed.

After a small breakfast of berries and a few roots the digimon scavenged, the group of digi-destined set off into the woods, with the digimon at their side, and Tai leading the way. Scarcely a word was exchanged as they trudged deeper into the snow-laden pine

forest.

To be continued, of course...

Edited by Nexis Starfrost. Many thanks, sis! ^--~

I firmly believe that all characters are created equal. ^^ No character bashing will take place in my fic, but I will portray them as their personalities indicate. So, I hope no one thought I was trying to bash their favorite character.
^_^

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****Author's Notes:****

This took a lot longer to get out than I had planned, but hopefully it was worth the delay. It just wasn't turning out the way I wanted it to...but I'm pretty satisfied with it now. I think. Yeah, I know; I'm too picky. Well, I guess that just shows that I really am my own worst critic, ne? ^^; Enjoy!

Standard disclaimers apply. I'm sure by now you know what they are.
^^

Chasing Shadows Chapter 1

An awkward silence had settled over the group. Awkward because Mimi was still radiating open hostility at Tai's back. He didn't look at her, but he knew her eyes were making a valiant effort to bore holes in his back. He swore he could feel a prickling sensation between his shoulder blades. Her glare was probably hot enough to melt steel.

He had no idea why she would still be so mad, even after several hours. It wasn't as if this was the first time he'd pulled a stunt like that, and even Mimi didn't hold grudges this long. Maybe it had something to do with that dream he'd interrupted. At the time, he'd been more concerned with getting Mimi to let go of him than what she'd been yelling in his face. Now that he thought about it, though...she'd said something about a guy. Prince Charming, was it? Tai snickered softly. He'd have to tease Mimi about that later. Preferably much later; like when she didn't look about ready to beat him to death with a stick.

Stepping over a fallen log, Tai irritably wished there was some sort of a path through these woods. Almost everywhere they had gone before, there was some sort of trail they could follow, even in other forests, although none had been as thick as this one. Actually, there had been a path, when they first entered; but gradually, as they went along, it became more and more strangled with dead weeds and needles, until it was impossible to distinguish from its surroundings. After a few hours of vainly trying to relocate the vanished dirt path, the kids gave up and headed for the only thing they could see, the mountains in the north. Tai estimated it would still be at least a week before they were even close, maybe longer, depending on the pace he managed to keep up. Everyone was weary, and tempers flared even more than usual, which was probably the real reason Mimi was still angry at him, he supposed.

Needles mixed with snow crunched noisily to his right as someone came up beside him. Looking over, he saw it was Sora with Biyomon a step behind. She gave Tai a small smile, but said nothing. Tai studied her for a moment, noting the distant look in her pretty amber eyes. She'd been so quiet lately...sometimes she would chat softly with her digimon companion, but other than that she mostly said something only when spoken to, and little at that. He'd never seen her so down. It was...depressing. 'Someone like her shouldn't look so sad.' He blinked. 'Where did that thought come from?' His thoughts were starting to wander too much, he decided.

There was one thing to be glad of, at least. He hadn't seen any more strange shadows; not yet, anyway. He couldn't shake the feeling that what he had seen had been real, and he'd see them again. He was being silly, he knew; the whole thing was probably just his exhausted imagination. Still, the anxiety remained, and he doubted it would go away any time soon.

"Can we stop now?" For a moment, Tai thought the voice had come from Sora, but a glance behind showed him Mimi had come close without him ever noticing. Wait...Mimi was talking to him again? "My feet hurt." She didn't even sound that mad anymore. 'Why do girls have to be so moody?' Of course, she didn't exactly sound pleased, either. Just...whiney.

"We have been walking for a while, Tai," Agumon put in. "Maybe we could find some food. I'm starting to get really hungry. If a bad digimon came along, I don't know if I'd be able to protect you."

"I know, Agumon, but we haven't seen any digimon at all since we got here." Tai glanced back, taking in the group of digi-destined. All of them looked tired, and cold. The snow may have let up, though small flakes still fell occasionally, but the temperature sure hadn't. They trudged along wearily, most not talking, not even the normally irrepressible Gomamon. It must be pretty bad if even he looked down. Sighing, he said, "But you're right, Agumon." Stopping, he gave their surroundings a quick inspection; it didn't look any different than any other place they'd been in this forest. Walled in by tall pines, the forest floor was littered with brown and green needles, and fallen branches varying in size from tiny twigs to huge logs. Rocks and boulders were becoming more common as they made their way closer to the mountains. It could be they were in the foothills already, but the land was still largely flat. Piles of snow covered the needles where the trees hadn't managed to catch it First. As it was, the pine limbs hung heavy with snow, but even so there was more snow visible on the ground than needles. Here was as good a place as any for a rest. Turning to the others, whom he saw had stopped to watch him curiously, Tai announced, "Ok guys, break time." Relieved sighs met the proclamation, and everyone plopped down wherever they stood, avoiding the snow where they could.

Tai seated himself cross-legged on a patch of needles and bare earth, his orange digimon next to him. Sora and Biyomon sat a few feet away; Biyomon said something softly enough that Tai couldn't quite make it out, but Sora only shook her head in response. She still hadn't said anything, not in a while now.

Matt sat with his little brother, T.K., and their digimon, Gabumon and Patamon, respectively. Mimi and Palmon joined them. Not far away,

Joe and Gomamon, and Izzy and Tentomon, seemed to be discussing something. Izzy flipped open his laptop, typed for a minute, then pointed something out to Joe. The blue-haired boy shook his head and made a wide gesture, which Tai assumed was meant to encompass the forest, to which Izzy shook his own head of dark red hair, pointing at the screen again. They both held a look of extreme irritation on their features, and it was directed at each other. This definitely aroused Tai's curiosity. It almost looked like they were arguing, and he hadn't ever seen the two of them fight before.

Agumon gave Tai a quizzical look as the boy got up and made his way over to the bickering duo, but made no move to follow. Probably just too tired. But he made sure to keep a close watch on his human partner.

"Hey you guys, what's up?"

Izzy looked up at Tai and nodded. "Oh, good. Maybe you can help."

"Uh...help with what?"

Joe cut in. "Izzy's absolutely positive we can make it to those mountains in a week, but even if he is right, that's still too long. We'll all freeze before we ever get there!" The tall boy pushed his glasses back up on his nose, not bothering to hide his annoyance.

"We won't freeze, Joe. It's cold, but not cold enough for that yet. It's perfectly logical for us to continue on until we can find a suitable cave in the mountains. A cave might not be much warmer than out here, but the shelter it will provide from the elements more than compensates for that. Your proposal of turning around now, when we've already come so far, is absolutely preposterous. We have more of a chance if we keep going than if we try to go back." The words were delivered in Izzy's usual calm tone, but he said them as though he were being forced to explain that the sky was blue. The fact that Joe noticed didn't help matters any.

"I'm not stupid, Izzy! But how do we know the mountains are closer than going back? It could easily end up taking even longer! Somebody's gonna get sick if we stay out in this cold much longer!"

Tai shared a bewildered glance with Gomamon and Tentomon. This was the sort of thing he'd expect to fight with Matt about, but Joe and Izzy? This was really getting out of hand. They seemed to have forgotten anyone else was even there, they were so wrapped up in their argument. By now, everyone in the group had come over to see what was going on, and they seemed just as confused as he was.

"Hey, cool it!" Tai's voice cut between the two, and they both stopped to look at him. "That's enough! I know everybody's tired and everything, but we can't start fighting now! We have more important things to worry about!"

Izzy regarded Tai with dark, speculative eyes. "Well, what do you think, Tai? You're the leader, so you have the final say anyway."

"Wha...?" Tai blinked several times, stunned. Sure, he'd been acting the leader almost since they'd landed in the Digiworld, but no one had actually called him as such before. He wondered if Matt accepted him as leader, too... a quick glance at the blonde revealed nothing; Matt wasn't letting it show what he thought, one way or the other.

Izzy and Joe were both looking at him expectantly, he realized. Waiting for an answer.

"Well..." Tai scratched the back of his head, uncertain. Mostly because he'd already forgotten what the question had been. Then he remembered. "I think it's better to keep going. It would probably take longer to go back, and I think Izzy's right about getting to the mountains in a week." He gave Joe a reassuring grin. "It'll be okay, dude! Don't worry so much!"

Joe nodded reluctantly, but didn't look convinced.

Over an hour later, Tai was close to pacing from impatience and restlessness; he wanted to get underway, but everyone else still seemed so tired. He always had a lot of energy to spare, but sometimes it could be a major drawback. Like now, when all he could do was sit around and wait. Searching for food and water had proved a waste of time; several teams had gone out looking, digimon and human alike, and all came back with the same results: absolutely nothing. That could prove more of a concern than the chill in the air, especially if something nasty decided to drop by for a visit. Like Myotismon, or Demidevimon. Or strange shadows...

Squashing that last thought before it fully formed, Tai looked around and noticed Sora sitting off to one side with Biyomon. It was a good thing Biyomon had been able to digivolve before they'd entered the forest; a good meal was all she'd needed, but she'd still be stuck as Yokomon if they'd come here first.

'I wonder what's eating her?' Sora still hadn't said anything, and avoided looking anyone straight in the eye. It almost reminded him of when she'd been afraid her crest would never glow...come to think of it, that hadn't been too long ago. But she was over that, wasn't she? Her Crest of Love had finally glowed, allowing Birdramon to digivolve to her ultimate form, Garudamon. He still remembered how he had felt, when Sora's crest had been consumed by that pink aura. A soft, comforting warmth, spreading through his chest...it had to have been Sora's love. He still wondered why no one else had mentioned feeling the same thing. But for some reason, his mind always shied away when this line of thinking came up, as it did now. He simply didn't want to think about it, though he couldn't have said why.

He sat next to her, maintaining a respectable distance without being far enough away to seem rude. She looked at him, red-brown eyes still holding that distant, withdrawn appearance; in the gray afternoon, they seemed dull. But that was just a trick of the light, he assured himself. Just the light.

Quickly he cast about for something to say, anything. He settled for something simple, if straightforward. "Is something wrong? You've been really quiet today."

Sora glanced away, and took a moment answering him. "No, I'm ok, Tai.

I guess maybe all this gloomy weather and everything is just getting me down." She glanced up long enough to give him a weak smile, then turned away again. He waited, but she didn't say anything else, and he was at a complete loss as to what he could say to get her to talk again. Biyomon looked at him with sympathy in her large blue eyes, but the bird digimon didn't say anything, either. Tai glanced at Agumon, and wondered briefly if everyone had gone mute as of late. Agumon appeared to be thinking the same thing.

Another hour passed without comment, then Tai bundled the group together and got them moving north again. He wasn't sure it was possible for them to become any more dispirited than they already were; the atmosphere was so oppressive it weighed down on everyone's shoulders like a ten-ton weight.

Twilight came and went, and the air grew cooler. The digi-destined stopped for the night in a tiny clearing that could have been the twin of the one they had rested in earlier that day, and every day before that. A fire was started with the aid of Agumon, and that went a long way in relieving the cold. Gabumon had sniffed out some berries, but no water was present. Thankfully, they had filled several plastic bags full of water at a river before wandering into this maze of a forest, but those wouldn't last forever. Already they were running low. The clear plastic baggies, interestingly enough, had come from Joe. He'd gotten them at that restaurant he'd been forced to work at with Matt by some ugly digimon named Veggiemon. After chasing the evil digimon away, Joe had swiped the bags from the kitchen, in the closest act to stealing Joe had ever committed. Not that any of them really viewed it that way; Joe and Matt had worked there under that slave-driver of a digimon, so in a way it was their pay.

Sleep came easily to no one, but when Tai woke Mimi for the second watch, she and everyone else had been sound asleep. For a moment, when she first opened her eyes and saw him leaning over her, he thought she was going to slap him for interrupting another dream. But she remembered the why of it before her hand left her side, and settled for a glare instead. As she left to go stand guard, Tai made a mental vow to avoid all situations that involved disturbing the princess's beauty sleep. It wasn't long before Tai himself was fast asleep, and Agumon beside him.

Mimi leaned wearily against a tree, listening to the gentle, rhythmic breathing of Palmon. She wished she could fall asleep, too. She was so tired...she felt like she'd been walking forever. Her delicate feet weren't made for this sort of thing. Well, her shoes weren't, anyway. It didn't change the fact that she was drop-dead exhausted.

She tried listening to the sounds of the forest instead of Palmon's steady breathing, and with a start she realized there was nothing at all to listen to. No owls, no small animals, not even any insects. Nothing at all. The forest was completely lifeless. Now that she thought about it, these woods had always been this quiet. She just hadn't actually focused on it enough to notice before now. Part of her wondered if anyone else in the group had realized how devoid the pines were of life, and the other part, the part she didn't really want to acknowledge, wondered why there were no digimon here. Maybe

they knew enough to stay away...maybe they knew something Mimi and her friends didn't.

Even these disturbing thoughts faded as Mimi's eyelids seemed to grow heavier, until she was fighting an uphill battle trying to keep them open. Eventually, she lost. Her eyes drifted shut, and sleep claimed her.

The small fire flickered, its fuel supply of dry pine needles almost gone. It struggled, clinging to life tenaciously, but its battle proved in vain. Flames wavered and died, leaving only tiny glowing embers in its wake, and soon, those, too, succumbed to the chill air and soft snowflakes that drifted down to smother it. Darkness crept in where the dim firelight had held the shadows at bay, but no one was awake to notice.

In the darkness, something shifted, twisting, dancing with the shadows in the forest. Something that absorbed what little light came from the cloud-covered moon; something that was even darker than the shadows that engulfed it. It seemed to slink forward, becoming more solid as it did so, silent as the night itself, toward one of the slumbering figures. It stopped, then, waiting, watching. The figure murmured sleepily, but didn't wake. On its waist something shimmered in light caught briefly from the moon, but was gone just as quickly. The thing that was the night, that was deeper than the night, crouched, fumbling for the shiny object at the figure's waist. It came loose, and the dark creature drifted back into the night, into the shadows that awaited it. Then it was gone.

To be continued...

Chapter 2 should be out soon; well, at the very least, it should be out quicker than this chapter was! Gomen nasai, minna! I hope you enjoyed this chapter. If you have any comments, good or bad, please send them to me! I really love hearing from you. I'll even write you back, if you want. ^^

For all those people who did email me: THANK YOU!! You guys are great! Your support goes a long way in helping me crank out these chapters. Arigato!

Thanks again to Nexis for editing this, and also being my co-author. You're great! Also, she's been doing a bit of fic-art for my story, plus a few other pics for Digimon! Interested? They should be posted on the same sites as this story. ^-^ (Yeah, I know...shameless plug. But hey, she *is* my sister! Besides, her work's really good, and it goes with the story.^-;) She's planning on doing one pic per chapter, but since I have to *write* the chapter first, a delay is to be expected, ne? ^^;

A small note: if the leader bit threw you off, remember, in my story they wandered into the forest before the whole Eighth Child arc began in the series, so that cute little discussion where the digi-destined confirmed Tai as leader didn't happen. That fact will actually become important later in the story, so keep it in mind. ^^

Oh, and remember minna: All Characters are Created Equal! (Henceforth this shall be known as the ACCE Movement. I don't know why...it just amuses me. And I am easily amused, ne? o.O) Ja mata ne!

2. Chapter 2

Chasing Shadows Chapter 2

First I'd like to say that I'm very, very sorry that I took so long to get this chapter out. I didn't mean to, but I got so caught up in other things that for a long time it took a backseat to everything else. However, I've always intended to finish it, and I will. I've barely even started yet! ^^

Let me know if you have any questions...I realize that a certain...event that took place in the previous chapter isn't mentioned in this part, but trust me, I didn't forget. There's a logical reason for my insanity. (Well, not really, but it sounds cool, ne? ^^;;)

Since I'm sure it's been a long time since most of you read the Prologue and Chapter 1, here's a (very) brief synopsis:

The digidestined are lost in a huge, seemingly never-ending pine forest. The weather is getting colder, and there's little food or water. As if that wasn't enough, Tai has been seeing strange shadows, and something visited the kids in the middle of the night, not that they were aware of it; they were all asleep at the time.

Yeah, I know, it was lame. Hey, I never said I was good at summaries...-- Anyway, I hope that refreshed your memory, for those of you that already read it. If you haven't read the previous parts, I strongly suggest you do, so this will make more sense. (Of course, I'm pretty sure no one would be here if they haven't read the first two parts, but you never know...^^;)

Well, enjoy!

Chasing Shadows Chapter 2

"How could you fall asleep on guard duty?!"

"Well, it's not like it's _my_ fault I'm so tired!"

Sora let out a small groan under her breath, hiding her face in Biyomon's soft pink feathers as she tried in vain to go back to sleep. This was getting to be too much. The last few days had been a vicious cycle of incessant bickering or dead silence. Sora was well aware that she wasn't helping matters with her own melancholy silence, but somehow she couldn't quite make herself care all that much.

With another small sigh, she reluctantly abandoned her quest for peaceful oblivion and sat up to watch the argument. At least this one was on a relatively new theme; Mimi usually managed to stay awake for her watch. As far as Sora knew, anyway.

On one hand, she agreed with Tai; in the Digiworld, it was dangerous to not have someone keeping a look out for hostile intruders. But then, they had yet to see a single digimon in this blasted forest, so it probably didn't make much of a difference. Still, better safe than sorry.

But then, on the other hand, Mimi's complaints about being tired were something Sora was sure everyone could sympathize with, even Tai, if he ever got off his permanent adrenaline-rush long enough to think about it. Getting lost in an endless forest, having a drastic lack of food and water, no shelter, and cold weather - complete with snow - had a nasty way of wearing people out. Sora shook her head, letting her mind drift back to Mimi and Tai's "discussion".

"What if something had happened?" Tai continued angrily.

"Lay off, Tai. Obviously nothing happened, so it's not like it really matters."

Sora turned and quietly regarded the owner of the voice as the blonde approached his two bickering comrades.

Matt favored Tai with an icy blue glare before continuing. "Maybe if you'd open your eyes for once you'd actually notice just how exhausted everyone is!"

Tai narrowed his eyes slightly. "Of course I can see that!" he snapped. "But that doesn't mean she can skip out on her watch!"

"I didn't do that on purpose!!" Mimi fairly shrieked.

Sora was just annoyed enough that she was about ready to go stop the fight herself, if that's what it took to shut them up, when someone did it for her. And, in her present mood, Joe was probably a lot more tactful about it than she would have been.

The tall blue-haired boy stepped between his younger friends; even though neither really looked like they were ready to come to blows, it couldn't hurt. For a moment, Sora was reminded of that time before when Joe had stepped in. That time, the argument of choice had been climbing Infinity Mountain. It seemed like such a long time ago, now...and, she recalled a bit wistfully, there had been a lovely hot spring, a refrigerator full of eggs, and a conveniently placed cave. Too bad they hadn't been as lucky this time.

"Calm down, you guys. I think since everybody's up now, we might as well get going. We aren't doing any good standing around fighting." Joe absently pushed his glasses back up on his nose as Tai and Matt each gave an almost grudging nod, still shooting glares at each other.

Sora glanced down as Biyomon yawned hugely beside her. "Good morning, Sora," she said cheerfully, if somewhat groggily. The bird digimon grinned hopefully, earning a small smile from her human partner in return. It wasn't much, but it was a start.

The day seemed to be passing with agonizing slowness, and Matt felt as though he'd explode from the strain. They had run into a bit of

luck earlier, however; the group had run across a small stream, so they were able to replenish their dwindling water supply. Near the stream several straggly bushes grew, and although they had few berries to offer, it was enough to get them by for another day or two, if they rationed it out just right. Still, the seven kids and their digimon were falling deeper into despair with every step they took. They'd fallen on tough times before, but it had never been quite this bad. Matt's lips twisted in a sardonic smile. How ironic it would be; the legendary digidestined, who had survived countless battles against evil digimon, would meet their tragic ends at the hands of nature itself. He almost laughed at the thought, but the sound stuck in his throat, which was probably just as well, all things considered. The last thing he needed was everyone thinking he had snapped - although truthfully he wasn't sure he'd deny such an accusation - when they were already feeling so down. He especially didn't want any more trouble from Tai.

Tai. Matt was sure he felt his blood pressure rise as he thought about his long-time rival and "leader". Matt snorted derisively, ignoring the concerned look Gabumon shot him. "Leader", indeed. How could Izzy call that...that _nuisance_ their leader? A small part of his mind told Matt he was being unfair, that he was just tired and irritable because of their current situation, but he roughly shoved that part of his conscience aside. No, _Tai_ was the one who was irritable and irrational! Look at the way he'd been treating Mimi the past two days! He had no right to yell at her like that. Tai knew they were all tired, so was it really such a surprise that Mimi had fallen asleep? Besides, Palmon had drifted off before Mimi did, yet Tai never yelled at _her_. Matt sighed and shook his blonde head angrily, once again drawing his digimon's attention.

"Matt? Is something wrong?" Gabumon's quiet, gentle voice penetrated the boy's inner monologue, and with another sigh Matt looked down at his dog - or perhaps lizard - like companion, forcing a tiny smile.

"Just thinking, Gabumon," he replied. He fell silent, listening to the crunch of dead pine needles and snow as the group walked wearily through the forest. The trees were thicker here, he realized; it was harder to see very far ahead. The sun had sunken low in the horizon, barely hovering above the tops of the tall pines. Soon they would have to stop for the night; once the sun fell below the tree line, what little light that managed to penetrate the thick green boughs overhead would be cut off completely. Matt estimated they had another hour at most.

Several minutes later, the group of dispirited digidestined and digimon came across a long, narrow valley. The sides were a bit steep, but nothing they couldn't handle. Well, Mimi might have a little trouble, in that ridiculous pink dress of hers...

Matt was near the back of the group, so by the time he reached the slope's edge, most of the others were already making their way down. Not surprisingly, Tai and Agumon were already waiting impatiently at the bottom. If he wasn't so irritated with the other boy, Matt might have allowed himself to be impressed by the sheer level of energy Tai seemed to possess. Even with all the strenuous conditions as of late, the kid could still run down a steep hill like this without even running out of breath. It was almost amazing. Almost.

Looking around, Matt made the startling observation that Mimi was nowhere in sight. He looked again, taking a mental count as he spotted his friends. Tai and Agumon were at the bottom of the ravine; Joe, Gomamon, Izzy, Tentomon, Sora, Biyomon, T.K., Patamon, and even Palmon were still climbing down the hill. But no Mimi. Where was she...?

His question was answered a moment later when something pink latched itself to his arm without warning, causing him to jump. He turned towards her, a scowl forming on his handsome features - he didn't like being caught off-guard, after all - but his irritation quickly dissolved when he saw the panic and fear glimmering in her hazel eyes as she gulped down breaths of air, looking like she'd been just finished a marathon. "Mimi? Are you alright? What happened?" he asked, concern now setting in.

Mimi's lips quivered slightly, and she had to draw in several deep breaths before she had enough air to speak. "I saw...something...some_one! Over...over there!" she gasped, pointing wildly behind her, the direction she'd apparently come running from.

Matt raised a skeptical eyebrow at her, glancing back into the shadowed trees. "Are you sure?"

The girl flushed angrily. "Of course! I know...I know what I saw, Matt! There was a guy, watching us from behind some trees over there! I thought I heard something, so I went to see what it was, and there was this guy with blue hair, staring right at me! Then he was just...gone! He was there one minute and gone the next, just like that!" She snapped her gloved fingers once to illustrate her point. "Matt...what if it was some sort of digimon? I mean, he _looked_ human, but Myotismon looks sorta like a human too..." she shivered at the name of their current nemesis, "...or maybe he's like Gennai...Gennai's not really a digimon _or_ a human..."

Matt was about to cut off Mimi's speculative chatter when someone else did it for him. Not that he was any happier to hear the new voice.

"Hey, you guys! Are you coming or what?" Tai bellowed up to them. "We'd like to find a camp site before _dark_, you know!"

Gritting his teeth, Matt tried to block out the annoying voice, but with little success. Maybe if he closed his eyes and counted to ten, Tai would be gone by the time he opened them...

"Hellooooo! HEY! Are you even listening to me, Matt?"

No such luck.

Gabumon cleared his throat to get his partner's attention. "Matt, we should catch up to the others, don't you think?"

Matt sighed. "Yeah, I guess." He started down the steep slope, Mimi and Gabumon in tow. He heard Mimi slip on the slick snow a few times, but otherwise the quick jaunt was uneventful. When they reached Tai and the others, Mimi immediately launched into her story, earning a mixture of surprised, nervous, and disbelieving looks.

Tai looked decidedly unsettled by the strange tale. His brown eyes clouded over briefly, but then he shook his head. "Mimi, we haven't seen any signs of life since we've been here, and we've been here for over a week. Are you sure you weren't just seeing things?"

Mimi turned on the boy furiously, obviously fed up with him. Matt couldn't blame her; he'd had more than enough of Tai's attitude as well.

"I know what I saw, Tai!" she spat.

He frowned at her, then smirked. "You're probably just seeing things...although you of all people should have gotten enough sleep last night..." he remarked. Mimi flushed and stuttered angrily, but no words came.

"That was hitting below the belt, Tai," Matt growled lowly in Mimi's defense. He smiled in satisfaction as guilt flashed briefly across the shorter boy's face.

Tai shook it off, and continued as though nothing had happened. "Anyway, I have something to tell you guys, too." He looked a little sheepish as he said this, shooting an almost apologetic glance in Mimi's direction, not that she was even looking at him. She was too busy silently fuming. "I think someone, or some_thing_, has been following us." He stopped when he saw the looks the other digidestined were giving him, then hurried on. "It's not like what Mimi said she saw. It's more like...shadows...that keep appearing everywhere, like they're watching us or something."

Matt snorted, throwing Tai a dirty look. "And _this_ is supposed to be more believable than Mimi's story? _Shadows_? Honestly, Tai, you're such a hypocrite!" No one else said anything, watching the developing fight silently. Matt didn't really care one way or the other, so he just ignored them for the moment.

Tai clenched his fists in angry frustration. "I've seen them more than once, and they're not like normal shadows. They're...I don't know...darker, like they suck in all the light. And the way they move...they're really fast; they dart around all over the place. I _know_ they're not natural! I just know it!"

Mimi cut in, "Yeah, well I know what I saw, too! There was a guy, with blue hair!" She blinked, then added, "Or maybe it was more purple...I'm not sure, it was kinda dark..."

Tai jumped on her mistake before she even realized she'd made one. "If it was so dark, how can you be sure you even saw anything? I've seen these shadows more than once, sometimes in broad daylight, so there's no _way_ I can be imagining them!"

Before either Matt or Mimi could retort, a soft voice broke in. "Tai, we need to find a camp site soon. It will be dark in less than half an hour, now," Izzy said, his voice betraying little emotion. The others still hadn't said anything; fighting was becoming all too common, and no one seemed to have enough energy to join this argument. They were listening, though. All the talk of strange people and shadows lurking about left them a bit nervous; several were glancing about timidly, as though afraid they might actually see something.

"Ok," Tai nodded at Izzy solemnly, "but I think we should go that way." Tai pointed down one side of the valley, where the trees were clustered together thickly, leaving only small paths to get through their bulky mass. The snow there was thicker, gleaming a dull gray in the fading light. All in all, it looked like the typical haunted forest out of some old fairy tale. "The last time I saw one of those shadows, that's where it went."

"Then why would you want to go there?" Biyomon asked, clearly frightened. "Shouldn't we avoid them?"

"We don't know what these things are gonna do. I say we find them before they find us again."

"You _would say that," Matt scoffed. "Always thinking with your fists instead of your head. Although, I guess there's not much in your head to think with, is there, Tai?"_

—

Unprepared for this verbal assault, Tai stiffened, then spun back to face his rival. "What is your problem, Ishida? I wasn't even talking to you!"

"My problem? Well gee, I don't know...maybe just that I think chasing shadows through some godforsaken part of the forest is a waste of time? Or it might be that I think you're being a real jerk, not that that's anything new...take your pick." Matt glared at Tai fiercely, a challenge written in his ice blue eyes. "I think Mimi's story is worth checking out, but I think _you_ are just delusional."

"Oh yeah? Well I think you just can't accept the fact that I might be right!" Tai raised a white-gloved fist in front of him, as though preparing to strike.

Matt's eyes narrowed dangerously. "I thought I told you not to raise your fist to me, Tai." The words were no less menacing for the quiet tone they were delivered in.

The brown-haired boy glared at him in outrage for another moment, then turned away, scowling ferociously. "Whatever, Matt. I'm going that way. You can come if you want, I really don't care."

"Fine with me," Matt snapped, then looked at Mimi, who returned his gaze questioningly. "I'm going to go check out this guy that Mimi saw."

Her eyes widened in surprise. "Really, Matt? You believe me?" The blonde nodded, and Mimi gave him a quick, appreciative smile. "Thanks." She glanced down at Palmon, and asked, "You believe me too, don't you, Palmon?" The plant digimon nodded once, refusing to meet Mimi's gaze. Mimi looked a little hurt at this, but Matt paid it no mind. Now was not the time.

Tai stared at them, then started walking off, without another word. Agumon immediately followed, and Sora and Biyomon trailed after them.

"So, I guess that's that, then," Izzy stated quietly. He shot an

apologetic look at Matt and Mimi, then he and Tentomon turned to follow Tai. "I hope we meet up with you again, Matt. And I hope you find what you're looking for."

Before he got very far, Joe stopped him. Digging into his bag, Joe brought out two of the four plastic bags of water, and half of the berries they'd collected earlier. "Here, you'll probably need these," he said, smiling softly.

Izzy blinked as he took the offerings, then looked up at Joe quizzically. "You're going with them, Joe?"

Joe nodded his affirmation, then said, "Someone has to keep an eye on them, right?" He smiled weakly.

"Yeah," Izzy replied. He looked at the food and water in his hands uncertainly. "But where am I supposed to put these? It's not like I can store them in my computer..."

T.K. giggled, startling what remained of the group slightly, since most of them had forgotten he was there. "You can borrow my bag, Izzy," he offered. The young boy took off his green backpack, making sure to unclip his digivice first, which he then reattached to the waistband of his shorts. "You can give it back when we meet up again!" he said optimistically.

With a thankful nod, Izzy took the backpack and placed the berries and water carefully on top, not bothering to look through the bag first. He didn't want to intrude on T.K.'s privacy, and Matt respected him for that.

"Well, I better catch up with Tai and Sora. Ja mata ne," Izzy said meaningfully. Not "sayonara", Matt noted; "ja mata ne". That meant Izzy didn't expect the separation to last for too long. Or at least, the young genius hoped it wouldn't.

With that said, they parted ways. Tai, Sora, Izzy, and their respective digimon went one way, while Matt, Mimi, T.K., Joe, and their digimon went another. Matt couldn't say he was all that surprised, really. It seemed as though the group of digidestined could never stay together for very long. Maybe that's just how it was meant to be.

The sky darkened, as twilight faded into night, but neither of the two groups stopped for a while. When they finally did, very few managed to fall asleep for the remainder of the night, caught up as they were worrying about shadows or unknown humans or digimon stalking about in the pitch darkness, ready to pounce at any moment, without warning.

And somewhere, in the black abyss of the night-cloaked forest, something was watching...and waiting.

To be continued...

Well, minna-san, there it is! I hope everyone enjoyed it as much as the last chapter. Please, don't hesitate to let me know what you thought of it! Authors live on feedback, you know. ^_^

In case you were wondering, in Japanese, "sayonara" means goodbye, but on more of a long-term basis. You'd say that to someone you aren't expecting to see for at least a few days or longer. "Ja mata ne", on the other hand, is more like "see you later"; this is used for short-term partings, like only a day or so. ^^

The characters might seem a bit OOC, but given their rather trying circumstances, I don't think it's out of line. And I wasn't trying to pick on Tai, either; I just wrote the way I think Matt would be feeling at this point. ^-^

Once again, I'd like to thank Nexis, and also Cres, Angel, Chrysalis Raina, Maki, Kira, and everyone who's ever emailed me with support, encouragement, or a nice kick in the butt to get me moving. Thank you so much! I couldn't do it without you guys. ^^Â

Ja ne! And please visit my homepage at www.angelfire.com/anime/starfrostpalace. That's the first place all my fics will be posted, as well as the fics of my friends and anyone else that wants to send me something. (Hint, hint. ^~)Â

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